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# Bridging Emotional Distance: Strengthening Family Communication among Pesantren Students during Ramadan

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***Abstract***
*Family communication is important for maintaining emotional connections between parents and children. For students living in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), institutional schedules and restrictions on electronic devices may limit opportunities to communicate with their families. This community service activity provided 93 students at Pesantren Tasdiqul Qur'an in Parongpong, West Bandung Regency, with learning and practice opportunities in open, empathetic, and assertive communication with parents. Conducted on February 23, 2026, the activity combined an educational presentation, guided discussion, participatory games, communication simulations, and reflection. Evaluation was descriptive and qualitative, based on observations of participation and contributions during discussions and simulations. Participants' responses highlighted concerns about limited opportunities to communicate with parents and the challenge of expressing feelings during available interactions. In the simulations, participants practiced composing messages expressing gratitude, longing, and apologies. These observations document engagement and opportunities for reflection and practice, but do not establish measurable improvement in communication skills or lasting changes in family communication. The activity illustrates a practical format for facilitating reflection and rehearsal of family communication among santri. Future programs should document needs assessment more systematically and, where feasible, involve parents in both the intervention and follow-up evaluation.*

***Keywords***: *family communication; santri; pesantren; emotional communication; Ramadan; community service.*

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**Introduction**

Family communication plays an important role in maintaining relationships between parents and children. Through communication, family members exchange information, express care, and share experiences and emotional states. Openness, active listening, and appropriate responses can support constructive family interaction. A review of research on parent-child communication describes links between communication patterns and family relationship dynamics (Anto et al., 2023; Zapf et al., 2023). Family communication is therefore relevant not only as an exchange of information but also as a means through which family members express support and maintain relationships.

The need for meaningful communication becomes increasingly important when children and parents are physically separated. One group facing this situation consists of santri (Islamic boarding school students) who live and study at pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Life in a pesantren results in activity patterns that differ from those of children living with their families, including limited opportunities for direct communication with parents. Under these circumstances, mediated communication serves as a means to maintain family relationships. However, remote communication has its limitations, as interactions occur via media and cannot always replicate the experience of face-to-face communication (Febyanti et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2025).

Recent research suggests that digital communication can help bridge physical and emotional distance between parents and adolescents. However, its relationship with family closeness depends on the purpose and context of the interaction rather than communication frequency alone (Park & Dworkin, 2026).

This situation is also evident in research regarding communication patterns between santri and their parents within the boarding school environment. Azzahra et al. (2024) indicate that communication between students and parents remains constrained by time and communication channel limitations, preventing optimal personal interaction. The advancement of digital technology offers students opportunities to maintain contact with their families; however, the use of these channels does not necessarily ensure that personal experiences and emotions are discussed.

A related study by Arif and Dewi (2025) examined interpersonal communication in parent–child relationships in Islamic boarding schools. Their study provides a relevant contextual basis for considering openness and empathy as important dimensions of communication for maintaining emotional closeness. The findings are used here as contextual support, not as evidence of the outcomes of the present activity.

This situation indicates that the issue of communication between santri and their parents concerns not only the frequency of interaction but also the nature of the communication itself. Limited opportunities for communication should be utilized to both convey information and foster emotional support. Research by Abdullah et al. (2025) involving santri reveals a positive relationship between the intensity of parent-child communication and the students' resilience. These findings demonstrate that communication with parents plays a crucial role in supporting santri as they navigate life in the boarding school. Similarly, Hastasari et al. (2025) highlight the importance of family communication in fostering personal resilience among students memorizing the Quran in the digital era.

Consequently, the limited time and opportunities for communication must be balanced with adequate interpersonal communication skills. Santri need the ability to initiate conversations, share experiences and feelings, clearly articulate their needs, listen actively, and respond empathetically (Spataro & Bloch, 2018; Moin, 2025). These skills are crucial because communication with parents does not always take place under ideal circumstances. When communication opportunities are relatively limited, brief yet open and meaningful interactions can be more beneficial than communication focused solely on conveying information about daily activities.

Evidence from an Indonesian pesantren context also highlights the relevance of interpersonal communication skills. Yanawati et al. (2025), in a descriptive study of Islamic Guidance and Counseling students living in a pesantren, found that most participants demonstrated a moderate level of interpersonal communication skills, pointing to the importance of strengthening competencies such as empathy and active listening.

This issue served as the basis for a community service initiative at the Tasdiqul Qur'an Islamic boarding school. The activity was developed as a continuation of the previous year's community service program at the same

pesantren. During follow-up coordination, the pesantren leadership requested further support to strengthen santri communication skills, particularly communication with parents. This partner-informed request, together with the continuity of the previous program, provided the basis for the current activity. No separate quantitative needs-assessment survey was conducted.

Based on these needs, the community service activity was designed using a participatory approach that incorporated presentations, discussions, games, simulations, and reflection. An experiential learning approach was employed to ensure that participants not only understood communication concepts but also had the opportunity to experience and practice the communication process firsthand. Research by Mulyani et al. (2025) on experiential learning further demonstrates the relevance of this approach to developing interpersonal communication skills.

Although previous studies have discussed communication constraints among santri and the relationship between family communication and resilience, practical accounts of educational activities designed to help santri rehearse emotionally meaningful communication with parents remain useful. This article contributes a descriptive account of a community service activity that combines communication education, discussion, simulation, and reflection in a pesantren setting. It does not seek to establish causal effectiveness; rather, it documents the needs discussed by participants, the learning activities implemented, and the limits of the available evidence for evaluation.

Accordingly, this community service activity aimed to provide santri with opportunities to develop their understanding and practice of open, empathetic, and assertive communication with parents, and to describe participant responses and the evaluation evidence available from the activity.

**Methods**

A community service activity was conducted at the Tasdiqul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Parongpong, West Bandung Regency, on February 23, 2026, involving 93 santri and santriwati. The activity continued a community service program conducted at the same pesantren in the previous year. During coordination about follow-up priorities, the pesantren leadership requested further support to strengthen students' communication with their parents. This partner-informed request served as the basis for the

needs assessment for the current activity; no separate quantitative needs assessment survey was conducted.

The method employed was educational outreach using a participatory, experience-based approach. This approach was selected to ensure that participants not only gained knowledge about family communication but also had the opportunity to discuss their experiences, reflect on their communication dynamics with their parents, and practice communication techniques applicable to daily life. The activity was conducted in four stages: preparation, material presentation, discussion and participatory practice, and evaluation and reflection.

**1. Preparation Phase**

The preparation phase involved reviewing the previous year's community service activities and coordinating with pesantren leadership about follow-up priorities. The leadership requested continued support to strengthen santri communication skills, particularly communication with parents. This partner-informed process was used to identify the focus of the current activity. The team did not conduct a separate quantitative needs assessment survey, so the needs assessment should be understood as based on partner consultation and program continuity rather than a systematic baseline measurement.

Based on these needs, the team developed materials focusing on family communication, the psychology of communication, open and empathetic communication, assertive communication, active listening, conversation-starting techniques, and skills for managing and expressing emotions during interactions with parents.

**2. Implementation and Material Delivery**

The implementation phase involves delivering educational material interactively. The content aims to foster an understanding among participants regarding the importance of family communication in maintaining emotional closeness between santri and their parents, despite limitations on face-to-face interaction.

The presentation of the material incorporates communication scenarios that resonate with the participants' own experiences. This approach enables participants to relate the concepts of family communication to the

realities of their daily lives at the pesantren, particularly when communicating with their parents under time constraints.

**3. Discussion, Participation, and Simulation**

Following the presentation of the material, the session continued with ice-breaking activities, participatory games, and interactive discussions. Participants were allowed to share their experiences, ask questions, and identify the obstacles they face when communicating with their parents.

The next stage involved communication simulations. Participants were guided to practice techniques such as initiating conversations, active listening, and expressing their feelings and needs openly and assertively. A key activity was simulating the conveyance of messages to parents; participants were asked to write down and express sentiments that had previously gone unvoiced, such as gratitude, longing, and apologies. This simulation served as both an experiential learning exercise and a space for participant reflection.

**4. Evaluation and Reflection**

Evaluation was descriptive and qualitative. Information was drawn from observations of participant engagement, contributions during guided discussions, questions raised, and reflections during communication simulations. The available manuscript records did not include verified participant-level pre-test and post-test responses for independent analysis. Therefore, the evaluation does not report quantitative changes in knowledge or attitude, statistical significance, or normalized gain. The qualitative observations were used to describe participation and the issues raised during the activity, not to establish causal effects.

The qualitative indicators considered were: (1) participant engagement during the presentation and discussions; (2) participants' ability to identify barriers to communication with parents; (3) discussion of open, empathetic, and assertive communication; and (4) opportunities to practice expressing feelings through simulation. These indicators describe observed participation and learning opportunities rather than independently measured gains in communication competence.

Qualitative information was summarized descriptively by organizing observations and participants' contributions around the activity's main themes: opportunities for communication with parents; barriers to initiating

conversations; expressing emotions; and practicing open, empathetic, and assertive communication. Because no verified participant-level measurement data were available for analysis, no inferential statistical tests or quantitative effectiveness claims are presented.

**Results**

A Community Service activity focused on strengthening family communication was held on February 23, 2026, at the Hall of the Tasdiqul Qur'an Islamic Boarding School in Parongpong, West Bandung Regency. The event involved 93 students as participants, two lecturers as keynote speakers, and two Communication Science students from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences (FISIP) at Pasundan University who served as facilitators. The number of participants and their active engagement throughout the event demonstrated the relevance of family communication to the lives of students pursuing their education away from their families.

The event comprised a series of interconnected activities: the presentation of material, participatory exercises, interactive discussions, and communication simulations. This sequence was designed to ensure that participants not only gained a conceptual understanding but also had the opportunity to reflect on their communication experiences with their parents and to practice the communication skills introduced.



Figure 1. Documentation of the previous year's community service activities that informed program development.

Documentation of the previous year's activities illustrates the continuity of the community service partnership at Pesantren Tasdiqul Qur'an. The 2026 activity broadened the focus from public speaking to communication with parents, in response to the pesantren leadership's request for further support. This continuity provides context for the program's development, although it does not constitute a formal quantitative needs assessment.



Figure 2. Implementation of the family communication activity in 2026.

The first stage of the activity involved a presentation by Taufik Hidayatullah covering the fundamental concepts of family communication and communication psychology, as well as the importance of fostering emotional closeness through open, empathetic, and assertive communication. The material was presented using a reflective approach, enabling participants to relate the concepts to their own experiences communicating with their parents.

The session continued with ice-breaking exercises and participatory games designed to encourage engagement. Participants then took part in an interactive discussion in which they could share experiences, ask questions, and describe obstacles they faced when communicating with their parents.

During the discussion, facilitators asked participants about their communication habits with their parents. Some participants reported communicating about once a week or less frequently, and discussion linked these limitations to pesantren rules governing electronic device use. Because

these comments arose from informal discussion rather than a structured survey, they should be treated as participant-reported examples, not as a measured estimate of the frequency of communication among all 93 participants.

Participants' contributions also raised concerns about the content of communication. Limited opportunities to contact parents could mean that feelings such as longing and experiences at the pesantren were not always discussed. Some conversations were described as focusing on routine updates, while participants also described difficulty initiating conversations about personal issues or emotional states. These accounts reflect issues raised during the activity and should not be generalized to every participant.

These discussion points suggested that the activity should address not only opportunities for contact but also ways to make available conversations more meaningful. The team therefore introduced and practiced open, empathetic, and assertive communication.

Participants took part in discussions, reflection, and communication simulations. During these activities, they discussed barriers to communicating with parents and practiced expressing feelings and personal messages in ways intended to be open, empathetic, and respectful. These observations document participation and practice opportunities; they do not establish measurable improvement.

The session introduced several communication techniques for possible use in interactions with parents: (1) opening conversations warmly, even when time is limited; (2) active listening; (3) expressing feelings, needs, and personal circumstances assertively; and (4) managing emotions before communicating. Participants had opportunities to rehearse some of these techniques through practical simulations, but their independent mastery was not formally assessed.



Figure 3. Simulation of message delivery to parents.

A key activity during the event was a simulation of conveying messages to parents. Participants were asked to write down and articulate their feelings toward their parents such as gratitude, longing, and apologies. This activity offered participants the opportunity to practice emotional communication firsthand within a reflective atmosphere.

Some participants became tearful as they expressed longing and gratitude toward their parents. These reactions were observed during the exercise and suggest that the prompts were personally meaningful for some participants. They do not establish that the activity enabled all participants to express previously unvoiced feelings or produced lasting changes.

Furthermore, discussions revealed that the communication barriers faced by the santri were not solely technical. Some participants felt uncomfortable or reluctant to voice complaints to their parents, fearing they might add to their parent's burdens. Others admitted they did not know how to initiate a conversation when facing problems or experiencing specific emotional states. These findings suggest that family communication skills are also linked to the courage and psychological readiness to express oneself.

The family communication activity formed part of the ongoing community service partnership with Pesantren Tasdiqul Qur'an. The previous year's program focused on public speaking. In subsequent coordination, the pesantren leadership requested further support focused on communication with parents, which informed the design of the 2026 activity.

This continuity shows how the current activity was shaped by partner consultation and the development of an existing community service relationship. The program extended the focus from public communication to interpersonal communication with family members; however, the needs

assessment was partner-informed rather than based on a separately administered survey.

**Discussion**

The activity indicates that communication with parents is closely connected to students' experiences, particularly when opportunities for face-to-face contact are limited by life in a pesantren. Participant responses during discussions and simulations suggested that communication with parents involves more than sharing information about daily activities; it also includes expressing feelings, experiences, and emotional needs. These observations are descriptive and reflect the issues raised during the activity rather than the experiences of every participant.

The limited opportunity for direct interaction highlights the importance of communication quality. When communication opportunities are scarce, the conversations that do take place need to provide space for students to share personal and emotional matters. These findings are consistent with research by Febyanti et al. (2022), which demonstrates the limitations of long-distance communication between parents and children and notes that technology-mediated interactions cannot fully replace face-to-face communication. In the pesantren context, Azzahra et al. (2024) also identified communication constraints between students and parents regarding timing and communication medium. Thus, the issue of communication is not merely about the availability of channels, but also the ability to utilize those opportunities in a meaningful way.

The emotional responses observed during the simulation highlight the value of providing participants with a structured opportunity to express feelings they wish to communicate to their parents. Expressions of longing, gratitude, and apologies during the activity suggest that the exercise prompted personal reflection. These responses should not, by themselves, be interpreted as proof of improved communication skills or lasting changes in family relationships.

From an attachment perspective, close relationships with parents can provide an important context for emotional security and support (Bowlby, 1969). In this activity, the message-writing simulation offered participants an opportunity to express feelings of gratitude, longing, and apology toward their parents. However, these observations should not be interpreted as evidence

of changes in attachment patterns or emotional security, as neither was directly assessed.

The activity's findings also align with research by Abdullah et al. (2025), which identified a positive correlation between the frequency of parent-student communication and student resilience. Communication with parents can act as a source of support for students navigating life within the pesantren environment. Similarly, Hastasari et al. (2025) demonstrated the significance of family communication in fostering personal resilience among santri who are memorizing the Quran in the digital age. These findings reinforce the conclusion that family communication should be viewed not merely as a routine activity, but as a crucial component of social and emotional support for students.

The participatory, experience-based approach gave participants opportunities to connect communication concepts with their own experiences through discussion, games, simulations, and reflection. In particular, the simulations allowed them to rehearse messages to their parents. This format is consistent with experiential learning principles, which emphasize learning through experience and reflection (Kolb, 1984; Wibowo et al., 2024; Beesley et al., 2026; Pautina & Tuasikal, 2022). However, the activity did not compare this approach with one-way instruction or use a verified evaluation design to measure the magnitude or durability of learning gains; therefore, its effectiveness cannot be established.

The message writing simulation gave participants a concrete task through which to reflect on how they might express gratitude, longing, or apology to their parents. Such activities may be useful for facilitating reflection and rehearsal. Research on active listening training also emphasizes the value of explicit practice and structured learning opportunities (Spataro & Bloch, 2018; Moin, 2025). Nevertheless, the available evaluation did not assess performance against a rubric or establish whether participants later used these communication practices.

Instrument selection is also an important consideration for future evaluation. Zapf et al. (2023) systematically reviewed measures of parent–child communication and their psychometric properties, making their review relevant when selecting or adapting tools to assess communication-related outcomes. This reference supports the recommendation to document and

justify the evaluation instrument; it does not validate the measures used in the present activity.

From a community service perspective, the activity illustrates how communication education can combine conceptual material, participant discussion, practice, and reflection. The contribution of this report lies in documenting a practical format for facilitating reflection and rehearsal of family communication among santri, rather than demonstrating causal or sustained effectiveness. Future initiatives could involve parents directly and evaluate whether the skills practiced during the activity are used in subsequent family interactions. Research on family-based interventions also highlights the value of including both adolescents and parents and collecting reports from multiple family members when evaluating communication outcomes (Yang et al., 2025; Miller et al., 2020).

**Conclusion and Suggestions**

The community service activity at Pesantren Tasdiqul Qur'an provided 93 santri and santriwati with opportunities to discuss family communication and practice open, empathetic, and assertive communication through presentations, discussions, simulations, and reflection. Participants' contributions highlighted limited opportunities to communicate with parents and the importance of expressing feelings alongside everyday information. The simulations also provided a space for participants to reflect on emotional experiences within family relationships, including longing, gratitude, and apologies. These observations document participation and reflection but do not establish measurable improvement in communication competence or sustained behavioral change.

A limitation of this report is that the needs assessment was based on priorities expressed by pesantren leadership and the continuity of the previous year's partnership, rather than a separately administered quantitative baseline survey. In addition, verified participant-level evaluation data were unavailable for independent analysis. The findings, therefore, remain descriptive and cannot establish the activity's effectiveness or demonstrate sustained changes in family communication. Future programs should systematically document partner consultations, use clearly described evaluation instruments where feasible, and consider follow-up with both students and parents.

Similar activities can be developed sustainably by involving parents, thereby extending communication practice beyond the students themselves. Future evaluations should retain the original pre-test and post-test responses, document the instrument and scoring rules, report the number of complete paired observations, and recalculate descriptive and inferential statistics from the verified data. Follow-up activities could examine whether communication practices introduced during the session are applied in everyday interactions.

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